

The Borders of Humanity: Cormac McCarthy and the Western Genre

M. Sandra Carmel Sophia * 
Professor of English,
Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation
Deemed University, Guntur, AP.

Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's Western novels, including *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*, offer a profound reimagining of the American West, blending stark violence with philosophical reflections on the human condition. This paper aims to analyze the existential themes that are present in McCarthy's work including fate, morality and the cyclical nature of time within the context of the frontier. However, these novels are not strictly Westerns because they go beyond simple frontier myths to explore other aspects of human experience including love, loss and failure of the myth. Through his poetic and often violent narrative, McCarthy paints a bleak picture of the American West not only as a geographical region but as a symbol of the human condition. In this paper, McCarthy's literary skills are described to show that his books are not just about the Western world but contain elements of human experience.

Keywords: *American West, existential themes, violence, morality, human condition, frontier myth, poetic prose, human struggle, fate, love, loss, philosophical reflections, literary analysis.*

Cormac McCarthy, originally named Charles Joseph McCarthy Jr., was a prominent American literary figure who authored a total of twelve novels, two theatrical plays, five screenplays, and three short stories, traversing the genres of Western literature, post-apocalyptic narratives, and Southern Gothic fiction. His oeuvre frequently encompasses stark illustrations of violence, and his stylistic approach is noted for its minimalistic employment of punctuation and attribution. He is extensively esteemed as one of the preeminent American novelists. McCarthy's origins trace back to Providence, Rhode Island; however, his formative years were predominantly spent in Tennessee. In 1951, he matriculated at the University of Tennessee, yet he subsequently withdrew to enlist in the United States Air Force. His inaugural novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, made its debut in 1965. Through the acquisition of literary grants, McCarthy

* Author: M. Sandra Carmel Sophia

Email: sandrasophia27@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2737-417X>

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was afforded the opportunity to traverse Southern Europe, during which he composed his second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968). *Suttree* (1979), akin to his other early literary works. A MacArthur Fellowship facilitated his exploration of the American Southwest, during which he conducted research and penned his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985). Although it initially received a tepid critical and commercial response, it has subsequently been acclaimed as his magnum opus, with certain critics designating it as the Great American Novel.

The title “The Borders of Humanity” encapsulates the central concern of Cormac McCarthy’s Western novels: an exploration of human nature against the boundaries of civilization, morality, and the physical frontier. In McCarthy’s work, borders are not merely geographic, but they are symbolic thresholds that his characters cross, often irreversibly. These borderlands serve as the setting for the unravelling of traditional Western myths and the emergence of a more complex, darker vision of humanity. McCarthy’s novels traverse landscapes that are both external and internal—harsh deserts, rugged mountains, and existential voids. They are tales of journeys and transformations, where the protagonists confront not only the dangers of physical terrain but also the moral ambiguity of their actions and the inescapability of fate. In this sense, McCarthy’s Westerners are less about conquest and more about confrontation with violence, death, and the fragile threads of human connection.

As Judge Holden asserts in *Blood Meridian*, “The truth about the world is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 245).

Cormac McCarthy, originally named Charles McCarthy Jr., was domiciled in 1933 in Providence, Rhode Island, and came of age in Tennessee. He is considered as the most important American authors of 20th and early 21st centuries. Known for his stark, minimalist prose and philosophical depth, McCarthy earned a reputation as a literary craftsman whose works often dwell on existential themes and the darker aspects of human nature. Although much of McCarthy’s early work was set in Appalachia, it was his Western novels that brought him widespread acclaim. His fascination with the mythos of the American frontier is evident in the vivid, desolate settings and morally complex characters that populate these works. He received numerous literary awards during his career, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Road*, and National Book Award for *All the Pretty Horses*. Critics such as Harold Bloom

have placed *Blood Meridian*. “on a level with *Moby-Dick*” as one of the greatest American novels, noting McCarthy’s “Faulknerian” yet unique style (Bloom 3). In *The New York Times*, Richard B. Woodward called him “one of the most distinctive stylists in American literature.”

Cormac McCarthy adeptly examines the parameters of Human Existence and the Western Literary Tradition in his oeuvre by transcending the limits of both ethical philosophy and genre norms. His storytelling frequently centers on intense circumstances within expansive, barren terrains where conventional understandings of civilization, ethics, and selfhood disintegrate. Below is an analysis of his engagement with these dual themes:

Cormac McCarthy adeptly examines the parameters of Human Existence and the Western Literary Tradition in his oeuvre by transcending the limits of both ethical philosophy and genre norms. His storytelling frequently centers on intense circumstances within expansive, barren terrains where conventional understandings of civilization, ethics, and selfhood disintegrate. His engagement with the major dual themes is highlighted in the novel:

The Borders of Humanity

McCarthy engages in an inquiry regarding the essence of humanity by subjecting characters to experiences of violence, mortality, and moral complexity. His analysis is rooted in philosophical and existential discourse.

a. Dehumanization through Violence

In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy articulates violence as a fundamental force of existence. The Judge, embodying a Nietzschean archetype, posits that warfare represents the quintessential manifestation of human nature. The savagery enacted by the Glanton gang obscures the distinction between the human and the animal. Violence transcends mere spectacle; it constitutes a metaphysical state that delineates and challenges the essence of humanity.

b. Moral Ambiguity and Loss of Innocence

In *The Road*, the dystopian backdrop reduces humanity to its most elemental form: mere survival. The odyssey of the father and son scrutinizes the possibility of maintaining virtue in a realm where civilization has disintegrated. The “carrying of the fire” serves as an allegorical representation of preserving moral integrity in the face of dehumanization.

c. Language and the Limits of Expression

McCarthy's sparse use of punctuation and his biblical stylistic choices imply that human language falls short in encapsulating the profound and daunting dimensions of human existence. This linguistic simplicity reflects the existential emptiness confronted by his characters.

D. The Western Genre: Subversion and Reinvention

McCarthy both conforms to and profoundly reconfigures the Western genre.

a. Classic Western Tropes

Settings: His literary works are set in the arid and unrefined terrains of the American Southwest and Mexico. The predominant themes that the readers come across in his works are Exploration, manifest destiny, lawlessness, and individualism.

b. Subversion of the Heroic Myth

McCarthy's portrayal of cowboys eschews romanticism. In *All the Pretty Horses* and the *Border Trilogy*, John Grady Cole embodies nobility yet remains ultimately impotent against the prevailing historical and political dynamics. The conventional hero archetype is supplanted by tragic figures who frequently encounter failure in their pursuits.

c. Existential Western

In *No Country for Old Men*, the sheriff symbolizes a relic of a bygone moral framework, confounded by contemporary malevolence. The antagonist, Anton Chigurh, functions according to his own enigmatic rationale, implying a cosmic amorality that transcends human ethics. McCarthy dismantles the Western's moral certitude and supplants it with philosophical fatalism.

d. Mythic and Biblical Undertones

McCarthy elevates the Western narrative to the stature of epic mythology. The desert emerges not merely as a backdrop, but as a spiritual crucible. Characters such as the Judge represent larger-than-life archetypes, embodying war, knowledge, and malevolence.

With its harsh setting of the Southwest of the 1850s, *Blood Meridian* is a severe and uncompromising examination of violence and the human condition. The story revolves around the Kid, a young fugitive who is caught up with scalp hunters headed by the mysterious and menacing Judge Holden. This journey is not a romanticized vision of the West, but a descent into a moral abyss, where the landscape itself mirrors the savage nature of the characters. The vast, desolate terrain, described as “a country of rock and naked earth that reached away on every side,” becomes a character, emphasizing the insignificance of human endeavors against the backdrop of an indifferent universe.

In “*Blood Meridian*” (1985), Cormac McCarthy presents a profoundly intense and violent examination of “The Borders of Humanity” within the context of the Western literary genre. The narrative transcends the traditional Western classification; it operates as an anti-Western and serves as a cosmic contemplation of violence, ethics, and human experience. The following outlines the methodologies employed by McCarthy to achieve this in the text:

The Borders of Humanity in *Blood Meridian*

a. Violence as the Essence of Humanity

McCarthy articulates a universe wherein violence transcends mere aberration, emerging as a fundamental constituent of existence. The heinous acts perpetrated by the Glanton gang—scalping, mass killings, and sacrilegious violations—are depicted in a manner reminiscent of biblical and poetic diction, thus elevating them to a universal and, paradoxically, almost sacred status.

The Judge posits: “War is god.” This assertion encapsulates McCarthy’s perspective on violence as a metaphysical tenet, subverting the notion that civilization represents humanity’s apex. In this framework, war is rendered as the authentic manifestation of human nature.

b. Dehumanization and Moral Ambiguity

Figures such as the Kid and Judge Holden traverse the continuum of moral ambiguity. The Kid, although exhibiting a more passive and reluctant demeanor compared to his counterparts, nonetheless engages in the same acts of brutality. His minimal resistance to the Judge fails to suffice in categorizing him as “good.”

The erosion of empathy and the institutionalization of slaughter signify a disintegration of the moral parameters that delineate humanity.

c. The Judge as a Post-Human Figure

Judge Holden transcends the conventional boundaries of humanity in a symbolic framework—he is characterized as hairless, colossal, intellectually formidable, and demonic. He amasses artifacts, engages in discourses on jurisprudence, natural sciences, and historiography, and executes individuals without any sense of remorse. He epitomizes an unadulterated manifestation of will and intellect, severed from ethical considerations.

He contests the conventional notion of human identity as fundamentally anchored in rationality and moral consciousness, advocating instead for a perspective that prioritizes domination and survival as the ultimate verities.

d. Nature as Indifferent

The arid desert expanse is extensive, awe-inspiring, and indifferent—a realm devoid of divine presence. It reflects the existential vacuity inherent in the human experience. There exists no discernible moral framework within nature; consequently, any semblance of moral understanding must originate from within the individual, yet McCarthy illustrates that this internal moral compass is predominantly absent or ineffective.

2. The Western Genre in Blood Meridian a. Subversion of the Heroic Western

Conventional Western narratives delineate a moral frontier wherein civilization incrementally establishes order. Conversely, *Blood Meridian* depicts the frontier as a domain characterized by the disintegration of civilization and the predominance of savagery.

The Kid, although a central figure, fails to embody the archetype of a hero. He does not emerge victorious, nor does his odyssey encompass a redemptive quality. Instead, the trajectory of his existence is not one of personal growth, but of mere survival amidst a chaotic reality.

b. Revisionist History

McCarthy utilizes authentic historical occurrences (specifically, the scalp-hunting expeditions conducted by the Glanton gang during the 1840s), yet he meticulously removes them from the frameworks of patriotic or manifest destiny discourses.

The novel offers a critical analysis of the myth surrounding American expansion by illustrating that the westward conquests were motivated not by noble aspirations, but rather by avarice, racism, and a thirst for violence.

c. Mythic and Biblical Tone

The narrative style draws upon the rhythmic structures of the King James Bible, thereby imbuing the text with an eternal, prophetic essence. The Western genre is thereby reconstituted into a grand apocalyptic saga.

The arid landscape evolves into a mythological realm, with the Judge serving as a symbolic representation of warfare and universal malevolence, transforming the Western into an arena of philosophical conflict.

d. Landscape as Character

The expansive and inhospitable landscapes transcend mere setting; they function as dynamic agents that significantly influence human behaviour. The relentless terrain mirrors the intrinsic brutality of the characters and provides neither refuge nor ethical guidance. Conclusion: A Western at the Edge of Humanity

In *Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy deconstructs the idealization of the Western genre and employs it as a framework to scrutinize the intrinsic characteristics of humanity. The narrative illustrates that violence, rather than virtue, fundamentally underpins the trajectory of human history. In doing so, McCarthy situates *Blood Meridian* within the realm of philosophical Westerns, serving as a contemplative exploration of warfare, ethical considerations, and the tenuous nature of civilization's façade.

Judge Holden is revealed to be the novel's protagonist, a figure who represents the main forces of savagery in the book. His philosophical pronouncements, such as "War is god," and his assertion that "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent," reveal a worldview where violence is not just a way to solve problems but the nature of life itself. He dismisses moral law as "an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak," showcasing a complete disregard for conventional morality. The Kid's journey, from a relatively naive teenager to a hardened participant in the gang's atrocities, serves as a stark illustration of the corrosive effects of violence on the human psyche.

Actions of the Glanton gang, motivated by greed and violence, reveal the harshness of frontier. The Wild West's romanticized image is destroyed by McCarthy's detailed descriptions of scalping and slaughter, which force readers to face the most sinister sides of human nature. Novel's language, rich in biblical and mythic allusions, elevates the narrative to an almost apocalyptic level, suggesting that the themes it explores transcend specific time and place. The cyclical nature of violence, a central theme, is exemplified by the haunting dance described at the book's conclusion, a terrifying representation of its perpetual nature.

Blood Meridian offers no easy answers, instead confronting readers with the fundamental questions of human existence. The novel's refusal to offer moral absolutes and its ambiguous ending leave a sense of unease and uncertainty, reflecting the overall theme of existential dread. The vast and unforgiving geography serves as a metaphor for the chaotic and indifferent universe in which humans strive to forge meaning. The novel's power rests in its capacity to force readers to face the unsettling realities of human nature and the ambiguity of the world, leaving them with a deep sense of the darkness that exists within.

Blood Meridian and All the Pretty Horses present starkly contrasting visions of American West. Blood Meridian plunges the reader into a brutal and amoral landscape, where violence reigns supreme and any semblance of romanticism is obliterated. The novel's tone is relentlessly apocalyptic, driven by the savage actions of the Glanton gang. The West, in this portrayal, is not a land of opportunity but a theatre of unbridled carnage. As McCarthy writes, "War was always a form of madness, perhaps the purest form" (McCarthy, Blood Meridian 248), encapsulating the novel's core theme of inherent human violence. The Kid's journey becomes a descent into darkness, where he witnesses and participates in horrific acts, mirrored by the harsh, unforgiving terrain.

In stark contrast, All the Pretty Horses offers an elegiac and lyrical view of the West, though one tinged with melancholy. John Grady Cole's journey is a quest for a vanishing world, a world where traditional cowboy values still hold sway. The novel's tone is reflective and nostalgic, enriched by McCarthy's poetic prose. While the landscape remains challenging, it is imbued with a sense of beauty and wonder. Grady's realization, "He knew that his place was with his own kind. That other places were not his place. That he was a horseman and that horsemen belonged on the plains and that there would be no more of that" (McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses 302),

highlights recognition of a fading era. Unattainable dreams are a major subject, especially in Grady and Alejandra's relationship. Her poignant observation, "Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting" (McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 227), underscores the gap among reality and aspiration.

Both novels explore the loss of innocence, though through vastly different lenses. In *Blood Meridian*, the Kid's innocence is brutally shattered by the relentless violence he encounters. Conversely, in *All the Pretty Horses*, Grady's innocence is gradually eroded as he confronts the harsh realities of adulthood and the impossibility of his romantic ideals. The nature of violence is also portrayed differently. While violence is addressed in *All the Pretty Horses*, it is viewed more emotionally and psychologically than physically. In contrast, *Blood Meridian*, violence is treated as an uncompromising human condition.

In these two works, the search for meaning is revealed to have two different results. In *Blood Meridian*, the search for the meaning is in vain, which points to the absence of the meaning in the world. However, in *All the Pretty Horses*, the element of search for meaning is more complex since Grady is in search of meaning in a world that is rapidly changing and is moving away from the values that he holds dear. Lastly, McCarthy uses strong graphic language for different functions in both novels. In *Blood Meridian*, it gives the reader a feeling of suspense and shares with him the villains of the wilderness and people. In *All the Pretty Horses* it paints the picture and reminds us of the time that is gone and can never be recollected. Thus, the comparison of these two stories shows that McCarthy gives a rather ambiguous and rather dark vision of the American West as the place of people's vices and shattered dreams.

The Crossing is 2nd novel in the Border Trilogy and is reflection on the themes of loss, destiny, and the thin line between the world of law and the world of the wild. Billy Parham is the protagonist of the book. He believes that capturing and putting efforts to give back a wolf to the Mexicans is a good act. Billy's journey is all symbolic in one way or the other. In one scene, a blind man who is a war veteran approaches him. That's the reason why things that are not connected with their stories are meaningless. "Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name" (McCarthy, *The Crossing* 288),

Themes of storytelling, meaning and memory are reflected throughout the novel. Billy's suffering of death, the betrayal, the isolation, and all of them are associated with McCarthy's interest in themes of existentialism and loss of innocence.

The Crossing, the 2nd instalment of the Border Trilogy, delves into profound themes of loss, fate, and the precarious boundary between civilization and savagery. Billy Parham's quest to recover a pregnant wolf transcends a mere physical journey, becoming a symbolic pilgrimage into the heart of existential questioning. Billy's naive belief in the nobility of his act is gradually eroded by the harsh realities he encounters, revealing a world where intention and consequences are often tragically misaligned. McCarthy uses Billy's experiences to explore the fragility of meaning and the ephemeral nature of understanding. The blind veteran's poignant observation, "Things separate from their stories have no meaning. They are only shapes. Of a certain size and color. A certain weight. When their meaning has become lost to us they no longer have even a name" (McCarthy, *The Crossing* 288),

This serves as a central motif, emphasizing the crucial role of narrative in shaping our perception of reality. Billy's trials, marked by death, betrayal, and profound loneliness, resonate with McCarthy's enduring exploration of existential despair and the inevitable erosion of innocence. The novel's sprawling narrative, filled with philosophical digressions and haunting imagery, underscores the vastness of human experience and the inherent tragedy of existence.

Cities of the Plain, the trilogy's concluding chapter, reunites John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in a post-war New Mexico landscape, a setting that serves as a poignant backdrop for the elegiac narrative. This novel is steeped in melancholy, chronicling the demise of cowboy lifestyle and relentless encroachment of modernity. John Grady's ill-fated love for Magdalena, a young Mexican prostitute, becomes a tragic focal point, embodying the clash between romantic idealism and the harsh realities of the world. His unwavering refusal to relinquish his dreams ultimately leads to his downfall, illustrating the destructive power of unyielding idealism in a world that increasingly rejects it. Billy's somber reflection, "You think when you wake in the morning yesterday don't count. But yesterday is all that does count. What else is there? Your life is made out of the days it's made out of Nothing else" (McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain* 287).

The above lines encapsulate the novel's central theme: the enduring weight of the past and the inescapable consequences of our choices. Through its somber tone and unwavering focus on

memory, *Cities of the Plain* brings the trilogy to a deeply moving close, highlighting the transient nature of human desires and the lasting impact of our actions. The novel serves as a meditation on the inevitability of loss, the fragility of human connection, and the enduring power of memory in the face of oblivion.

The Border Trilogy constructs a complex tapestry of American West, moving beyond romanticized notions of frontier to explore the deeper existential questions that permeate human existence. McCarthy masterfully employs the landscape as a character, reflecting the inner turmoil of his protagonists and the broader themes of the novels. The trilogy's exploration of loss, fate, and the erosion of innocence is not merely a lament for a bygone era but a profound meditation on the human condition. The characters' journeys, marked by both physical and emotional trials, illuminate the enduring struggle to find meaning in a world that often seems devoid of it. McCarthy uses his unique prose and unblinking rendering of human experience to create a powerful and lasting depiction of the contradictions of life, death, and the relentless quest for meaning.

In *Cities of the Plain*, the final book in the Border Trilogy, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are ranch hands in postwar New Mexico. This is a melancholy novel, a novel of the death of the cowboy life and the unstoppable march of modernity. The central plot is John Grady's doomed love for Magdalena the young Mexican prostitute. His idealism and refusal to relinquish his dreams ultimately lead to his tragic downfall. In a moment of despair, Billy reflects: "Your life is made out of the days it's made out of. Nothing else."

Through its pathetic tone and emphasis on memory, *Cities of the Plain* brings the trilogy to a deeply moving close, emphasizing the ephemeral nature of human desires and the enduring consequences of our choices.

Cormac McCarthy's Western novels, far from adhering to the conventional tropes of the genre, transcend its limitations to become profound philosophical explorations of the human condition. In *All the Pretty Horses*, *Blood Meridian*, *Cities of the Plain* and *The Crossing*, McCarthy masterfully blends mythic and the historical, crafting narratives that grapple with fundamental questions of violence, morality, identity, and the inexorable passage of time. He dismantles the romanticized image of the American West, replacing it with a stark, unyielding realism that compels readers to confront the most unsettling aspects of humanity. This unflinching portrayal of violence, particularly in the *Blood Meridian*, serves not as mere

sensationalism but to examine the inherent darkness within the human psyche. As the Judge states, “Whatever exists, without my knowledge exists without my consent” (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 198), showcasing character's belief in absolute power of will and the justification of violence as an expression of that power.

However, in this darkness, McCarthy also brings to light the strength of the human spirit. The enduring power of hope and human capacity too long is demonstrated by John Grady Cole's quest in *All the Pretty Horses* to get at vanishing ideal, even if the inevitable disillusionment comes. In the same way, Billy Parham's never-ending trek in *The Crossing*, filled with loss and existential questioning, is a testament to the human need to find meaning in a universe that seems indifferent. His reflection, “You never know what bad luck your bad luck has saved you from” (McCarthy, *The Crossing* 136), highlights a stoic acceptance of fate and a recognition of the unpredictable nature of existence. This spirit, however, is not always happy: in *Cities of the Plain*, for instance, characters are weighed down by the past and the gradual decline of their dreams.

McCarthy's writing style is poetic in that his narratives are written in the plain language but with the rhythm and tone of the Bible. The language that he uses is simple and plain, but it has a strong emotional impact, and it describes the beauty and rigors of Western territory. The element of ethical grey area is also present in the works of the author, which adds to his examination of people's character. His characters are not black and white, good guys and bad guys, but complex people with a certain set of problems in a rather ambiguous world. This is a refusal to provide clear moral resolutions that force the readers to question their own beliefs about morality and justice.

Cormac McCarthy's literary oeuvre transcends the confines of the Western genre by engaging with the existential boundaries of human experience. His depictions of landscapes extend beyond mere geographical representation—they encompass moral and metaphysical dimensions. In doing so, he reconfigures the understanding of both human identity and the potentiality of Western narrative forms.

Should you require assistance in developing a paper or delivering a lecture, I am prepared to aid in outlining a comparative analysis or to propose significant texts and passages for more profound inquiry.

Therefore, Cormac McCarthy's Western books are some of the most significant works of literature in world, which are equally valuable for their belonging to the Western genre. By removing the glamour of the romance of the American West and putting in its place the reality, he makes the reader face the worst in people. Still, he also glorifies the spirit of man, his ability to rise from the ashes and adapt to the new reality. Even though his stories are often dark and disturbing, McCarthy's writing is filled with a kind of moral complexity and philosophical subtext that lingers in the reader's mind, leaving a lasting impression on the American literary mainstream.

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